

NATIONAL

Israeli and US interests led to arms sales

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The plan to swap arms for Iran's help in gaining the release of American hostages in Lebanon was born of a convergence of interests between Israel and the United States.

Israel has secretly supplied US arms to Iran since before the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war. Israel's goals were to keep archenemy Iraq tied up militarily and to cultivate intelligence ties with Iranian officials. The sales also provided Israel with much-needed foreign exchange.

Despite the US embargo on arms sales to Iran, Israeli officials repeatedly sought Reagan administration approval to continue shipping Tehran surplus US arms stockpiled in Israel. Some administration officials balked. But an equivocal response from other senior officials was taken as a green light by Israel.

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The US view of the issue began to change in mid-1985, at a time when Central Intelligence Agency officials were desperately seeking a way to free the CIA's Beirut station chief, William Buckley, who was being held hostage by the pro-Iranian terrorist group Islamic Jihad.

In May 1985, a CIA draft paper calling for an easing of the US arms embargo as a means of gaining ties with "moderate" Iranian factions was circulated and later revised into a National Security Council policy proposal. In the meantime, an NSC consultant made contact with David Kimche, then director general of Israel's Foreign Ministry.

Finally, in the summer of 1985, Mr. Kimche met in Washington with then-US national-security adviser Rob-

ert McFarlane and the secret Iran arms operation was planned. An Iranian businessman and a Saudi billionaire were asked to serve as middlemen to arrange the arms sales and shipments.

Under the initial arrangements, US arms from Israeli stockpiles in Israel were to be sold to the Iranians. The US government would replace the sold items.

According to Mr. McFarlane, President Reagan gave verbal approval for the covert efforts as early as mid-1985. President Reagan and Attorney General Edwin Meese have said the President was unaware of secret arms shipments before a formal written presidential "finding," dated Jan. 17, 1986, authorizing the circumvention of the US arms embargo and other US laws.

The covert arms effort was justified within the administration in part as a means to gain the release of American hostages in Lebanon. But it also was seen as a means to cultivate ties among "moderates" in Iran and to prevent possible future Soviet domination in a post-Khomeini Islamic republic. Despite objections by prominent members of the NSC, including Secretary of State George Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, the covert arms shipments were begun.

In August or September 1985, the first two plane loads of US arms were delivered to Iran. On Sept. 14, the Rev. Benjamin Weir was released by Islamic Jihad. White House officials were disappointed that other hostages were not released with Mr. Weir.

Another weapons shipment was made in November 1985 but was returned by Iran when it was discovered that the Israelis had substituted obsolete US arms. Officials in Washington were incensed. The episode led US officials eventually to take over the secret operation.